DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 162 382 CS 502 303

AUTHOR Ferris, Charles D.
TITLE Remarks of Charles D. Ferris, Chairman, Federal Communications Commission before the Seventh National Symposium of Action for Children's Television, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., Monday, May 1, 1978.
PUB DATE May 78
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the National Symposium of Action for Children's Television (7th, Washington, D.C., May 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Broadcast Industry; *Citizen Participation; Communications; *Federal Regulation; *Futures (of Society); Information Science; *Information Systems; Mass Media; *Media Technology
IDENTIFIERS *Federal Communications Commission

ABSTRACT

Information has become the lifeline of United States society, and consumers--especially those concerned about children--need to become concerned with the entire information phenomenon. Those who control access to information will be responsible to a great extent for the future values of society, and involved citizens should participate in shaping what the future communications environment will be. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should regard the overall public interest as its only constituency; should be evenhanded in enforcing rules and protecting the public; should refrain from censorship of specific program content; should promote excellence through diversity, and diversity through competition; and should favor the development of new technologies and services. The public has the right and the responsibility to monitor the performance of industries regulated by the FCC. The power of citizen participation in FCC proceedings may be seen in the growth of Action for Children's Television and in the broadcast industry's response to it. The FCC is now considering many issues with important implications for the future; citizens' groups should become involved in the discussions and decisions regarding these issues. (GW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

FOR RELEASE UPON DELIVERY
12:15 P.M., May 1, 1978

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Charles D. Ferris

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

REMARKS OF CHARLES D. FERRIS

CHAIRMAN, FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION

BEFORE THE

SEVENTH NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

OF

ACTION FOR CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, D. C.

MONDAY, MAY 1, 1978, 12:15 P.M.

ED162382

Information is becoming America's most consumed product. We eat, drink, play, learn, and decide our business and personal affairs on the basis of information. We are insatiable. The more we want, the more we get. The more we get, the more we want. We are now an information based economy. Already 50 percent of our gross national product is bound up with information activity. Nearly half our labor force earns its living by creating, transferring, processing or evaluating information.

Seventy-five years ago our labor force was primarily agricultural. Twenty-five years ago the industrial sector was dominant. But today we have placed our future in the hands of those who own, control, transfer, interpret, analyze and distribute information.

Let's face it. We're hooked on information. It has become the lifeline of our society and the woof and warp of our social fabric.

CS502303

Electronic communications and computers have replaced the steam engine and the railroad as the basis of this new economy. Communication and information systems are becoming increasingly effective substitutes for transportation systems. You can vote on local issues and order movies at home on your television set. The U. S. mail is testing an electronic message service. Travel to the doctor's office for a medical checkup may be a thing of the past. Already Native Americans in remote parts of Alaska take courses by two-way satellite with teachers in Washington.

The development and combination of new technologies is awesome. The ramifications for our society are explosive.

Consumers--especially those concerned about our children--need to become concerned with this entire phenomenon, not just the small part of it we call "television" today. For our children, and our children's children, will be far more dependent on electronic communication.

Those changes that are with us now and those that we can see but dimly will challenge our basic values. They will test the limits of our economic and social systems. They will surely test the regulatory process at the Federal Communications Commission. We will be making policies now which will influence how we live in the distant years to come. As involved citizens, you should participate in this process.

You are all familiar with the impact of television on our lives. It has brought us shared national experiences that have held us together--and those that have pulled us apart. Imagine, then, how much greater the impact will be as our communications system develops from mass media to personal, specialized services.

Electronic TV games are replacing electric trains as the symbol of this generation's play. The next generation may learn to count not on their fingers but on personal calculators.

Information is the most precious currency of a free society. Those who control access to information are our national trustees. Like it or not, they will be responsible to a great extent for the future values of our society. How we live, how we learn, how we love and how we laugh will be determined in no small part by the world view they create. And the life patterns we develop will ultimately be repeated in Cairo and Caracas.

But what do these changes mean for the FCC? They mean simply greater complexity--greater challenges. Communications services are no longer severable into single sources of sound, picture, or digital information. Technologies are converging. Who will develop and own the new technologies; who will control them; who will have access to them; and at what cost?

The future of this nation's communications services is, I believe, far more expansive than simply radio and television. Radio and television have an essential function in our society. But the big picture is bigger than a 21-inch screen. My advice to you as concerned citizens is to stay tuned and stay involved. You have learned to talk back to your TV set. But don't tune out on all the other issues before the Commission. These issues will affect our children--and their environment --as certainly as they are affected by the television environment they watch today.

As a nation, we have only recently become concerned with the quality of the American environment. You should participate in shaping what our communications environment will be. The real excitement and challenge is that we are not carving up or protecting scarce and limited resources. We are guiding the emergence of new and abundant ones. You can help determine whether an increasingly smaller number of owners control this environment, or whether the individual citizen, by having access to a greater variety of information sources, can balance the power of larger institutions.

Recently I spoke to the National Association of Broadcasters and described for them my thoughts on the regulatory process. As concerned citizens, you are an essential part of that process. I want to share my thinking with you.

There are, I believe, several essential principles which should determine how the Commission acts.

First, I regard no industry--or particular consumer viewpoint--as a "constituent." By law, the Commission's only constituency is the overall public interest.

I recognize that there are many different publics--and that no single consumer group represents the collective public interest. Each group channels its energies and efforts and provides us with valuable facts and perspectives. Often these are views without an economic self-interest, and thus unlikely to be expressed by industry parties. The regulatory stew is richer, thicker and more nourishing because of your efforts.

We will therefore encourage participation in agency procedures by all parties--consumers and industries alike. But we are charged by law to make our own independent determinations of what is in the public interest.

Second, we will be even handed in enforcing our rules and in protecting the public. We will no longer be more concerned when broadcasters short change their advertisers than when broadcasters short change the public--including our children.

Third, I will not exceed the authority granted to me under the law. I will expect broadcasters to meet objective standards of public service. But I will not attempt to censor specific program content. Judging the subjective quality of programming is your responsibility as citizens and consumers--not ours as regulators.

Further, I hope to promote excellence through diversity--and diversity through competition. You in Action for Children's Television have seen the power of competition as opposed to regulatory fiat. Your own annual awards for children's programming provide a healthy stimulus to excellence in the programming marketplace.

Finally, I favor the development of new technologies and services. The dead hand of outmoded regulations, which too often merely protect the status quo should be lifted. Cable, satellite distribution, translators and fiber optics may provide the base for specialized children's services that commercial broadcasting has not provided.

If the FCC follows the principles I have outlined, the public will have even greater opportunities to affect our communications

environment. You have both the right and the responsibility to monitor the performance of the industries we regulate and to particpate in our proceedings. But this is a right which must be exercised with discipline and endurance. It requires a commitment to dig deeply. A quick jab here and there has little effect.

We are going to expect less rhetoric and argument, and more facts and rigorous economic analysis, from the industries we regulate. And we will expect the same from you as concerned citizens as well.

With a diversity of perspectives before us, we can create and define enlightened and practical regulatory policies. But there must be relative equality among the parties for the process to serve its ends effectively. Even if you do not participate, we are still mandated to promote the broader public interest. But without you we may be less creative and less responsive to real needs.

You can provide us with local experiences on the effects of our policies. What seems to make sense in Washington may not wash in Wilmington. The public interest as viewed from the Potomac may prove detrimental in Paducah. We need to know how what we do affects what you do.

Too often we have made decisions on the basis of information supplied solely by parties with competing economic interests. We have been characterized--often wrongly, but sometimes correctly--as merely umpiring between competing industry interests. This role can and will be changed.

Analysis by parties with direct economic interests is both necessary and helpful. But in-depth analysis of our proposed policies by consumer interests is equally essential. Our policies are no better than the process which conceives them. And our process is only as strong as the public participation it evokes.

We must provide some financial assistance to consumers so that they can help us in our rulemaking proceedings. I will support programs to encourage more effective consumer participation before the Commission.

Citizen participation in Commission proceedings has historically been brief. But your contribution has been impressive. There is no better example of the power of citizen participation than the issue of children's television. In ten years what was a small group of concerned parents has grown into a national grassroots organization. ACT has sensitized both regulators and broadcasters to the needs of young viewers.

Your efforts before the FCC, beginning in 1970, resulted by 1974 in voluntary industry reductions of commercial time on children's programs, the elimination of certain commercial practices, and an FCC requirement that television stations air programming for children "designed to educate and inform...and not simply to entertain." Broadcasters have responded to your efforts with programs like School House Rock, In the News, Big Blue Marble and the After School Specials. There is far more to be done. As Commissioner Washburn recently noted, further reductions in commercial time may be appropriate. Clustering of commercials at the beginning and end of programs may be worth re-examining. I share Commissioner Washburn's

concern on this issue. The Commission will consider this and other options through its Children's Television Task Force, which we have recently reconvened.

At a minimum, we need to provide you and the public with more information on the economics of children's programming and advertising, and on the economics of broadcasting in general. You can decide for yourself, based on this information, whether regularly scheduled high-quality programming directed to specific age groups is, in fact, beyond broadcasters' means.

On this as on other issues, I urge you to be future oriented and forward thinking. Tinkering with policies created a generation ago will do little to insure that the public's interests will be protected in the future. Developing a constituency knowledgeable about technologies looming on the horizon may be more difficult, but it will surely have greater effects.

Remember that in the late 1940's and early 1950's the Commission made most of its long-term policies on commercial television. Twenty years later the general public became concerned and aware but too late to participate.

Do not forget this lesson. There are many commercial television issues still to be considered or reconsidered. But there are many more in other communications services. The Commission's policies in the common carrier field are laying the foundation for the information industries of the future. And in all of these you must become concerned and participate.

--The cable television industry is struggling to develop new programming services to begin to compete with broadcasters, not just retransmit their signals. There is potential for a children's cable channel--perhaps with a fee rather than commercials. The FCC and Congress are considering cable's regulatory future. You should be involved.

--Congress is considering proposals for long-range financing of public broadcasting. There is an active debate on how best to structure public broadcasting and adequately stimulate new and creative programming, including programs for children. You should be involved.

--The Commission will be considering innovative information systems that could replace your child's encyclopedia, as well as other proposals like television captioning systems for the deaf and for Spanish speaking. These will benefit children as well as their parents. You should be involved.

--The Commission will be deciding whether to allow competition in home telephone service as well as to to include charitable contributions and institutional advertising expenses of telephone companies in the rates you pay. You should be involved.

--In the next two months alone we will be assessing the future of UHF television, of computers and communications, and of noncommercial radio. You should be involved.

But these are just a few. Over a longer time period we will be conducting the Network Inquiry, which will examine fundamental broadcasting issues.

The essential message is clear. You must learn how we work, get involved, and stay involved.

Finally I look upon you and the perspective you bring to our agenda not as an adversary but as a conscience. And this is your most valuable contribution--your most essential role.

I share the urgency of your concern and I seek the close scrutiny by you of all our actions. I welcome your partnership and urge that you expand your perspective to include much more of what will effect tomorrows' generation. Together I hope we may earn from them, a "well done" for the decisions we will make today.

Thank you.